DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 078 984 88 RC 007 091

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TITLE The Education of the American Indian Pupils in Classes for the Mentally Retarded.
INSTITUTION Northern Indian California Education Project, Eureka.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C. Projects to Advance Creativity in Education.
PUB DATE Jun 73
NOTE 18p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *American Indians; *Community Involvement; Cultural Factors; Cultural Pluralism; *Curriculum Development; Educable Mentally Handicapped; Educational Opportunities; *Mental Retardation; Self Concept; Skill Development; *Special Education; State Programs; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *California

ABSTRACT

The Northern Indian California Education Project is devoted to increasing the quantity and quality of accurate information available about local American Indian life through curriculum development, to helping school personnel to better understand and meet the needs of Indian students, and to increasing the participation and influence of Indian people in their local educational processes. This Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title III project report, a product of the special education component of the project, provides additional information to teachers, administrators, and other educators on the special educational needs of Indian children. Its main focus is the Indian child in the educable mentally retarded program. None of the children depicted in the report are actually enrolled in special education classes. (FF)

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NORTHERN INDIAN CALIFORNIA EDUCATION PROJECT

E.S.E.A. TITLE III

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THE EDUCATION OF AMERICAN INDIAN PUPILS IN CLASSES FOR THE MENTALLY RETARDED

Marilyn Miles

NORTHERN INDIAN CALIFORNIA EDUCATION PROJECT

June 1973

PREFACE

The Northern Indian California Education Project is an all-Indian staffed federal project serving Indian pupils in particular, and all students indirectly, in twenty-four public elementary and secondary schools in six Northern California counties. Approximately 1,500 Indian students are enrolled in these mostly rural schools. The target area itself is the home of at least fifteen different tribes.

To help meet the goals of the project there are several components devoted to increasing the quantity and quality of accurate information available about local Indian life through curriculum development, to increasing the competencies of school personnel in better understanding and meeting the needs of Indian students, and to increasing the participation and influence of Indian people in the educational process at their local schools.

The heart of the Northern Indian California Education Project lies in the involvement of and the responsibility to the Indian communities within the area. The elected Project Policy Council representing a variety of tribes and areas and the local committees organized at each individual school confirms the importance of Indian people taking leadership in the education of Indian children.

This report is a product of the special education component. Its purpose is to provide additional information to teachers, administrators, and other educators on the special educational needs of Indian children. Its main focus is the Indian child in the educable mentally retarded program. The pictures in this report are for illustration purposes only and none of the children shown are actually enrolled in special education classes.

INTRODUCTION

Before approaching the question of the American Indian pupil in classes for the educable mentally retarded, it may be of help to review briefly the philosophy of special education programs for mentally retarded minors adopted by the California State Department of Education.

Foremost, "Public schools must provide the fullest possible opportunities to meet the educational needs of citizens without regard to economic or social status, race, religion, or abilities." In regard to special education programs for mentally retarded minors the following principles have been outlined in the guidelines for developing a course of Study and Curriculum for Mentally Retarded Minors in California Public Schools (California State Department of Education, 1968).

1. Mentally retarded minors have the same right to educational opportunities as do all other minors.
2. Mentally retarded minors must be identified with great care, giving due consideration to all factors which might effect a child's performance.
3. Mentally retarded minors must have a program designed specifically for their needs.
4. Mentally retarded minors must be educated in situations that permit them to develop skills necessary for daily living.

Although, the above points do not include all of the specific details of the special education philosophy, they do represent a general description. Beyond this, another aspect of the philosophy should be considered. This is in the area of curriculum development. Referring to the State Department

of Education's foundations for curriculum development the following principles are presented:

> In order to develop an appropriate curriculum, the professional staff must...understand his (the child's) nature, his disabilities, but more important, his abilities. The curriculum must provide for a development that is consistent with the individual differences of the pupils enrolled.
>
> Motivation greatly affects readiness to learn. Therefore, the curriculum must be developed and organized to provide experiences that will capture and hold the pupil's attention. Professional personnel developing the curriculum for mentally retarded minors mjst include opportunities for learning experiences drawn from the actual daily living situations of the pupils.

To best review an educable mentally retarded program to see if a child's needs are being met, it is well to keep the above described philosophy as well as the individual child's needs in mind. This report proposes to do this in terms of the Indian child enrolled in an educable mentally retarded class.

A SURVEY OF INDIAN PUPILS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

Before attempting a review of programs enrolling Indian educable mentally retarded pupils it was necessary to determine how many Indian children were involved in such programs. Prior to presenting the results of surveys within the Northern Indian California Education Project target schools, statewide statistics should perhaps be presented.

In 1969, the California Legislature directed that a study be made to determine if a disproportionate number of children from ethnic minority groups were enrolled in classes for the educable mentally retarded. The question of referral and diagnostic procedures (for example, traditional intelligence tests) discriminating against minority children had long been a topic of professional discussion.

The report submitted by the State Department of Education in 1970 to the Legislature concluded that indeed there was a disproportionate number of Mexican-American (or other Spanish surname) and Negro pupils in classes for the educable mentally retarded. Another source has also reported that EMR class enrollment in 1970 was 28% Brown and 26% Black despite the fact that the Spanish surname and Black populations make up 15% and 9% of the state population.(Mercer, 1970) This report resulted in a number of changes both in future placement procedures and in the re-evaluation of students already in programs.

The question of over-enrollment of American Indian pupils has to date resulted in a negative response. Both statewide results and Northern California statistics indicate that there is not a disproportionate number of American Indian pupils in EMR classes.

During the 1971-1972 school year, a survey of all twenty-four elementary target schools within the Project area was completed. Following is a summary of the data obtained:

1. Twenty-four elementary level Northern California schools were surveyed.
2. A total student population of approximately 8,025 was represented.
3. An Indian student population of approximately 1,250 was represented.
4. Size of schools ranged from 13 pupils to 741 pupils.
5. The total number of teachers of the educable mentally retarded was eight (8). A number of schools reported teacher aides.
6. Seven (7) schools reported no special education programs of any kind on campus, though some reported transporting pupils to other schools.
7. In the twenty-four schools, there were a total of 86 educable mentally retarded students and 10 transitional pupils.
8. In regards to American Indian enrollment, there were ten (10) Indian EMR pupils and two (2) transitional pupils.

The following table depicts the enrollment information obtained.

TABLE 1

Enrollment in Target School Special Classes

	1971-1972 School Year		
	Total Population	American Indian Population	American Indian Percentage of Total Enrollment
24 Target Schools	8,025	1,250	15.57
Educable Mentally Retarded Classes	86	10	11.61

During the 1972-1973 school year a similar survey was again conducted. The results were very similar to the previous year's survey. During this second survey, however, only twenty of the twenty-four schools participated.

Table 2 represents the 1972-73 data.

TABLE 2

Enrollment in target school special classes

	1972-1973 School Year		
	Total Population	American Indian Enrollment	American Indian Percentage of Total Enrollment
20 Target Schools	6,229	1,135	18.20
Educable Mentally Retarded Classes	71	5	7.00

The results indicate that at the current time, Indian children are not over-represented in special education classes. It had been of concern that the situation of placement that was occurring to other ethnic minority children was also occurring to Indian children. It has been suggested that there may be few Indian children in special education classes for a number of reasons: (1) relatively few Indian children meet the low I.Q. criterion for placement, (2) because of rural locations there may be no existing programs, or (3) that stereotyped low expectations by school personnel result in fewer referrals. It should be noted that among those schools surveyed that reported non existing programs, teachers were asked how many children they would refer for possible EMR evaluation. Again no disproportionate number of Indian children was indicated. It appears also that perhaps because of the trend toward "mainstreaming", less children are being segregated into special education programs.

The above information helps keep the picture of the Indian EMR student in the proper perspective. The focus is one of making sure only Indian children who are indeed mentally retarded rather than academically retarded

are labeled as such, but that those that are mentally retarded are receiving services. That because of cultural differences children are not inaccurately diagnosed and placed in an inappropriate program. Because there is not a disproportionate enrollment does not eliminate this possibility, but it does lessen the probability that it is occurring in a widespread fashion.

One further point, the figures reported herein are intended to be approximates. Perhaps no child is less easily identified by educators than the Indian child. Too often he is seen as Mexican-American or an "other". However, it is felt that the general conclusions regarding American Indian enrollment in classes for the educable mentally retarded are accurate.

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES

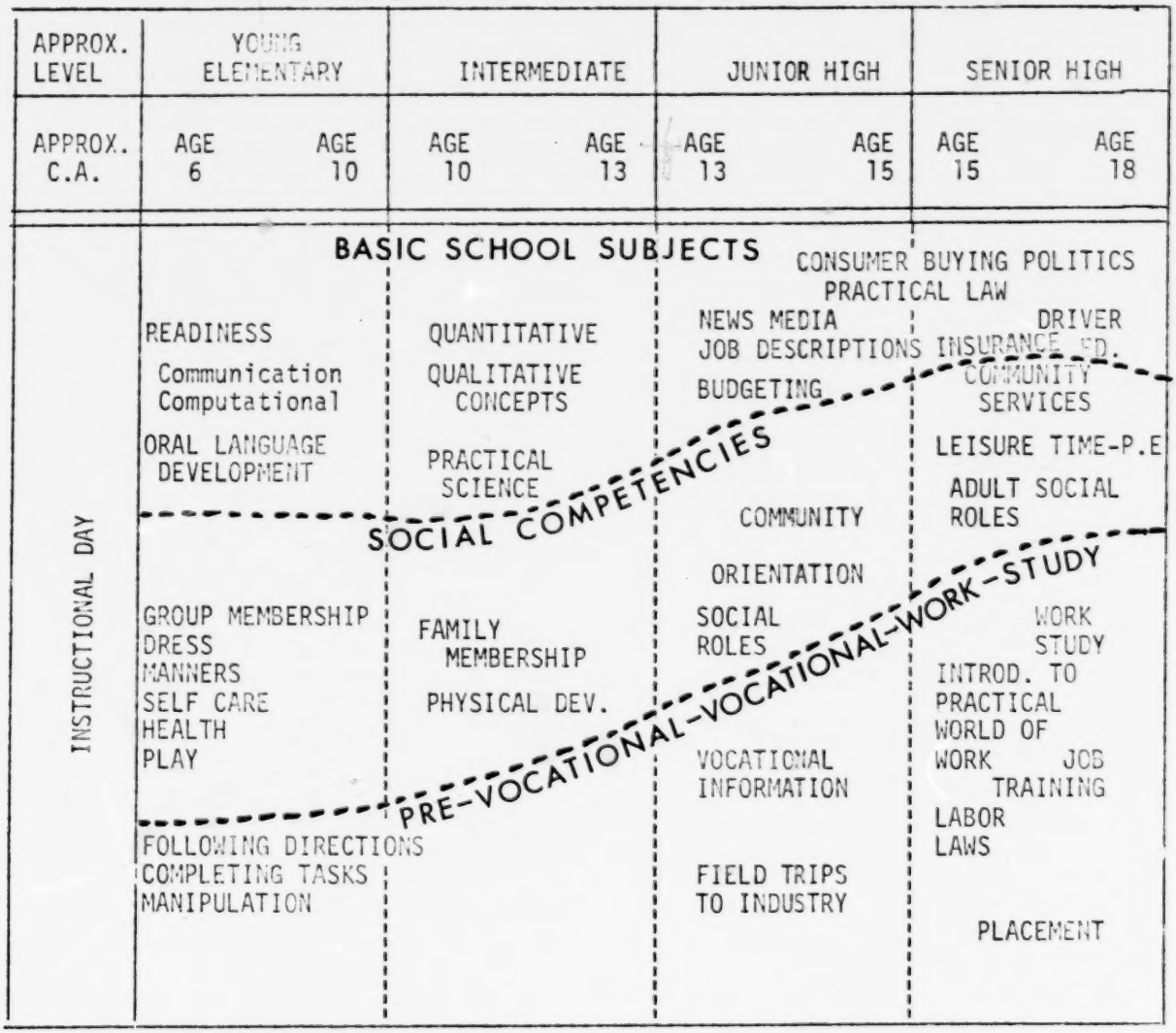
Within the past two years, staff of the Northern Indian California Education Project have visited and observed a multitude of classrooms within the target area. Beyond this, many parents and teachers have been met. Of particular interest has been the work conducted with special education classes. Teachers' guides for educable mentally retarded pupils have also been reviewed. General observations have been drawn regarding the appropriateness of curriculum and recommending possible changes.

While the number of Indian children in EMR programs is small, schools that service a high Indian population need to see that this population is reflected in the curriculum and the school in general. Further, programs located at or near reservations will through the passage of time have served many Indian children. More important, often being the only minority child in a group of children makes the situation even more insecure for that child. So that although there may be only one Indian child in a particular class it is of primary importance that he and his needs be represented within the curriculum.

Teachers' guides for mentally retarded developed by county school offices or individual school districts follow closely the philosophy of the Department of Education presented earlier. Because of current legislation and trends most guides are written in behavioral terms. They serve as an outline for teachers to follow in developing activities to meet certain objectives. Perhaps where the weakness lies is in the failure to emphasize the importance of selecting activities to meet the desired objectives that are familiar and of interest to children from different cultural backgrounds.

General suggestions for developing a balanced curriculum proposed by the State Department of Education are set forth in the following chart:

GENERAL SUGGESTED CURRICULUM EMPHASIS FOR EDUCABLE MENTALLY RETARDED

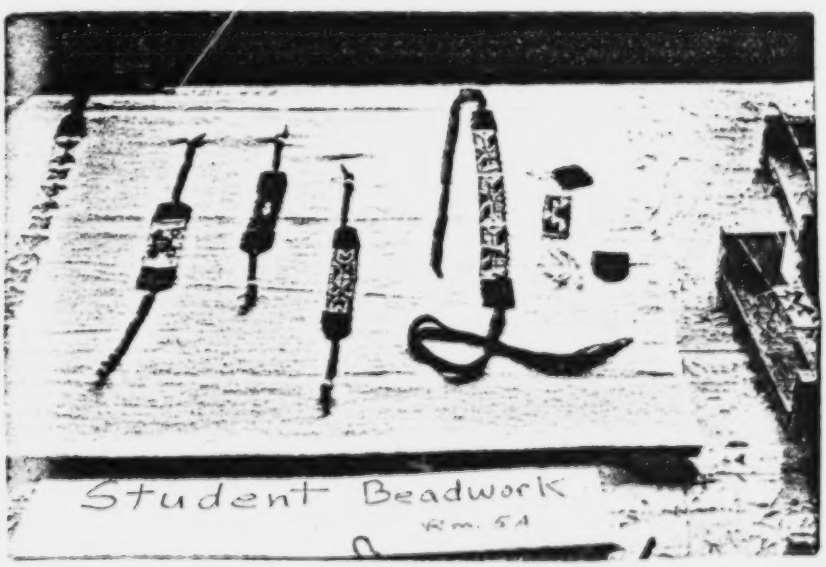


(Guidelines for Developing a Course of Study and Curriculum for Mentally Retarded Minors in California Public Schools. 1968)

Examining this chart and the principles for a good educable mentally retarded program one sees the importance of the child obtaining a good self-concept, of understanding family membership and orientation to his community. It is here where a child being Indian will make very much of a difference on the approach used and information presented.

As stated earlier, learning experiences should result from and be in accord with daily living experiences. This is the greatest weaknesses of all EMR programs observed by this staff. The families, the ways, the experiences being presented in the class are not the families, the ways, the experiences of the Indian child.

At one high school program within the target area an attempt was made last year to motivate the pupils within an EMR program by presenting craft activities that were of interest or familiar to these students. For example, beadwork taught by a local Indian elder very much motivated these children. Whereas ordinarily absenteeism was extremely high among the Indian students, attendance picked up significantly on those days such activities were planned.



It does not take great wisdom or intense analysis to recognize when one segment of a population is excluded from the curriculum. Following are some suggestions that may serve as fundamental bases for corrective action:

(1) In screening for possible placement in EMR classes more care needs to be taken if the child is Indian. The difficulty of distinguishing between the academically retarded child is especially acute with children from different cultures. Traditional intelligence tests are known to be good in predicting school success; therefore, they may be excellent in identifying the academically retarded child. However, all factors need to be taken into consideration in determining which of these same children are really mentally retarded. The case of the "6-hour" retarded child is too common for ethnic minority groups.

It is important to understand a child's cultural background in order to understand its influence on his performance. A liaison person from the Indian community (for example, an Indian teacher or counselor aide) may be able to provide more insight about a particular child or family than a teacher or psychologist will ever obtain.

(2) The curriculum must be pluralistic in emphasis. Children have different cultural backgrounds, therefore the curriculum and teaching methods must be adjusted to make the Indian child's school experiences more compatible

with his daily life. In short, enable the Indian student's functional information, knowledge, and skills which he has acquired at home and in his community to become a more integral part of the curriculum. This would increase the school experience's relevance to the student's life outside the school. Indian parents or community people should be involved in the classrooms as teachers, aides, and speakers since they could be the content of the curriculum with their knowledge of traditions and mores as well as serve as positive models for the children. The curriculum should include activities that promote a respect for Indian traditions and Indian identity. Crafts, music, storytelling are natural vehicles for this.

(3) Non-Indian teachers should take the initiative in learning more about the local culture and community. The teacher and the school in general should work on reducing the discrepancy between the school's model of conventional behavior and that of the child's home, community, and cultural group. Individual teachers should examine their models of conventional behavior for unnecessary ethnocentric bias and excessive rigidity.

(4) A child's strengths as well as his weaknesses should be a focus of instructional procedures. For example, because of traditional ways an Indian child may function more effectively in an oral situation rather than a reading situation. Or a child may have particular strengths in the area of art and crafts or in knowing and understanding nature. Activities and materials should be selected to focus on the child's strengths and weaknesses.

(5) In regards to developing skills necessary for daily life, activities should be included that teach survival skills which are deemed necessary for survival in the particular community whether it be rural, reservation or urban. A mentally retarded Indian pupil on a reservation should learn those skills necessary to survive on the reservation. He needs to learn the special services available to him in his particular community.

(6) The EMR teachers needs to establish good rapport and an effective working relationship with parents. In EMR

classes more so than in the regular program, Indian parents are often unsure of what is happening to their child. Initially, they may have little understanding of why their child is in a particular program. From the very moment a child is suspected as possibly mentally retarded extreme care must be taken that parents understand every step of what is happening. It may take utilizing an Indian teacher aide, or some other person to explain more clearly the situation.

The right of the parent to fully understand and be involved in the decision making regarding their child must be guarded against the expedient or easy way out of the school handling it all.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that the philosophy of special education programs are good and commendable ones. We have found that most local teachers' guides follow this philosophy closely, however, what is completely ommitted is a recognition that children come from different cultural backgrounds. So too often activities suggested to learn certain concepts are not relevant to Indian children.

The difficulty lies in a mono-cultural school system existing in a multi-cultural society. So that although a teacher may say "I see each student as an individual" she is defining this "individual" in terms of her own values. There needs to be more than one set of values and more than one way of life represented in the classroom. This is the challenge that faces the entire school system if all children are to have an opportunity to excel.

Curricular material and procedures should emphasize a pluralistic approach. The area of crafts and music is a natural for Indian culture to be a part of the curriculum on a regular basis. The Indian tradition of storytelling is another.

Extra efforts must be taken to ensure that Indian parents fully understand and are involved in the decision making regarding their child's special education placement. An Indian aide in the classroom might help establish a better understanding between the parent and the school.

These conclusions have been brought forward by others. It is up to those involved in curriculum development to see that these suggestions are emphasized. It is the teacher's role that to see that they are implemented. To date very little attention has been paid to the Indian child in a special education program. No doubt partly because the number

is few. Nevertheless, the needs of those few must be met.

It is felt that regardless of how well intended the policy stated in the statement, "Public schools must provide the fullest possible opportunities to meet the educational needs of citizens without regard to...race," it is in error. It is our contention that to provide the fullest possible educational opportunities to an Indian child his culture must be recognized, understood and reflected within the school system.